

Sunday Reset

"So glad we've almost made it

So sad they had to fade it

Everybody wants to rule the world..."

Est

Sunday arrived with a clarity I hadn't felt in weeks.

I woke up in my own bed—not Tui's couch, not tangled in borrowed blankets, not surrounded by the unfamiliar shadows of someone else's apartment. My own sheets. My own pillow. My own particular arrangement of mess that somehow made sense to my brain.

The morning light filtered through my curtains, soft and golden, casting long rectangles across the floor. Dust motes drifted lazily in the beams, suspended in the stillness like tiny stars.

For a long moment, I just lay there.

Not thinking about William. Not replaying the voicemails or the kiss or the vomiting. Just... existing. Breathing. Letting my body remember what it felt like to wake up without the crushing weight of heartbreak pressing down on my chest. It wasn't gone, exactly. The ache was still there, tucked behind my ribs like a bruise that hadn't quite healed. But it was quieter now. Manageable. Something I could carry without being crushed.

Progress, I thought. Small, fragile progress.

I got out of bed.

The apartment needed work.

Not just a surface cleaning—the kind of half-hearted tidying I'd been doing for weeks, shoving things into closets and hoping they'd organize themselves—but a real, thorough, get-on-your-hands-and-knees-and-scrub kind of work.

I started in the kitchen. The dishes had piled up while I was at Tui's, a small mountain of plates and cups and utensils that had accumulated during my pre-breakdown spiral. I washed them all, one by one, feeling the hot water soften my hands as I scrubbed away the residue of meals I barely remembered eating.

The refrigerator was next. I threw out everything that had expired—which was most of it—and made a mental note to go grocery shopping later. Actually go, this time. Not just order delivery because the thought of leaving my apartment felt too overwhelming.

I wiped down the counters. Scrubbed the stovetop. Cleaned the sink until it gleamed. The work was meditative, repetitive, the kind of labor that occupied my hands while leaving my mind free to process.

This is how you rebuild, I told myself. One dish at a time. One surface at a time. Small tasks that add up to something larger.

The living room came next. I gathered all the scattered papers—bills I'd been ignoring, notes I'd scribbled and forgotten, reference photos for projects that had long since been completed—and sorted them into piles. Keep. Recycle. Deal with later. The "deal with later" pile was worryingly large, but at least it was organized now. That counted for something.

I vacuumed the floor, getting into the corners that I usually ignored, the spaces where dust bunnies had taken up permanent residence. I rearranged the furniture slightly—not a major change, just a shift that made the room feel different. New. Like a space that belonged to the person I was becoming, not the person I'd been. The bookshelf got reorganized. Photography books on one section, separated by technique. Fiction in another, alphabetized by author because I was apparently in that kind of mood. Magazines in a third, the ones I'd been saving for inspiration, their spines lined up with military precision.

It felt good.

It felt like control.

After weeks of everything spinning out of my grasp—William, my emotions, my dignity—it felt incredible to control something as simple as the arrangement of my possessions.

The bedroom was the hardest.

This was where I'd cried the most. Where I'd lain awake at night, staring at the ceiling, wondering what was wrong with me that made people leave. Where I'd checked my phone obsessively, waiting for messages that never came. I stripped the bed completely. Sheets, pillowcases, the mattress cover—everything went into the washing machine. I opened the windows wide, letting fresh air flood the space, chasing out the stale atmosphere of grief and insomnia.

The closet got a purge. Clothes I never wore. Things that no longer fit. Items that reminded me of people I was trying to forget.

I didn't throw out everything connected to William—that felt too dramatic, too performative, like something a character in a movie would do. But I did move a few things to a box in the back of the closet. The shirt I'd worn on our first meeting. The jacket I'd bought specifically for the photo session.

Out of sight, I told myself. Not out of existence. Just... out of sight.

By early afternoon, the apartment was transformed.

Clean floors. Organized shelves. Fresh sheets on the bed. Windows open to the city sounds below—traffic and voices and the distant rhythm of music from somewhere.

I stood in the middle of my living room and took a breath.

The space felt different. Lighter. Like it had been holding its breath along with me, and now we could both finally exhale.

This is a start, I thought. This is how you begin again.

I sat down at my desk and opened my laptop.

The screen glowed to life, displaying the cluttered desktop I'd been ignoring for weeks—files scattered everywhere, folders with cryptic names, screenshots I couldn't remember taking. But first, before I dealt with any of that, there was something I needed to do.

I opened my email and started typing.

To: Nut

Subject: RE: Company Therapist - Inquiry

Hi Nut,

Thank you again for everything at the office the other day. Your understanding meant more than I can properly express.

I've been thinking about what you said—about the company therapist and the resources available. I'd like to take you up on that offer. I think... I think I need to talk to someone. Professionally. About some patterns I've noticed in myself, and some things I'd like to understand better.

Could you send me the information on how to set up an appointment? I'd appreciate any guidance you can offer.

Thank you, Est

I read the email three times before hitting send.

Each time, I almost deleted it. Almost convinced myself that I didn't really need help, that I could figure things out on my own, that asking for support was somehow a sign of weakness.

But then I remembered Hong's words. Everyone needs someone objective to talk to.

And Tui's. You deserve to have someone in your corner who isn't us.

And my own realization, standing in the studio with tears in my eyes: There has to be something wrong with me.

Maybe there wasn't anything wrong with me. Maybe I was just... human. Flawed. Learning. But a professional could help me figure that out. Could help me understand why I kept making the same choices, kept falling for the same types of people, kept expecting different results from identical situations.

I hit send.

The email disappeared into the digital ether, carrying my admission of need with it.

Done, I thought. One step forward.

While I had the laptop open, I started thinking about work.

Not in the panicked, desperate way I'd been thinking about it for weeks—not as a distraction from my feelings, not as a way to bury myself so deep in obligation that I didn't have time to process.

This was different.

This was about wanting more.

I'd been doing the same type of work for too long now. Restaurant shoots. Café openings. Menu photography for places that went viral on social media and then disappeared three months later. It was steady work, and it paid the bills, and I was good at it. But it wasn't what I'd dreamed about when I picked up a camera for the first time.

I wanted something different. Something that challenged me. Something that let me use my skills in new ways, that pushed me beyond the comfortable patterns I'd fallen into. Less restaurants. Less typical photos. Less jumping from location to location, capturing food that looked beautiful but felt... empty. I wanted to create something meaningful. Something that mattered.

Maybe it's time to reach out, I thought. To look for new opportunities. To stop settling for good enough and start pursuing great.

I opened a new browser tab and started searching.

My phone rang. The sound startled me—I'd been so absorbed in my research that I'd lost track of time. The afternoon light had shifted, the shadows growing longer as the day aged.

I glanced at the screen. Nut.

Already? It had only been an hour since I'd sent the email about therapy. Surely he wasn't calling about that.

"Hello?"

"Est! Sorry to call on your day off." Nut's voice was its usual energetic self, words tumbling over each other in that rapid-fire way of his. But there was something genuine underneath it—an actual apology, not just a formality.

"It's fine," I said, and found that I meant it. "What's up?"

"I have an opportunity for you." There was a pause, like he was checking notes. "We have a shoot coming up for a new makeup line. Pretty big project—national brand, major campaign, the whole works."

My interest sharpened. "Okay..."

"We had four photographers lined up originally. But one of them—she just found out she's pregnant. Congratulations to her, obviously, High-risk. To avoid any complications, she's dropping some of her more physically demanding jobs effective immediately. You know how these things can be—long hours, physical demands, all that."

I did know. Studio work could be grueling. Standing for hours under hot lights, adjusting equipment, moving constantly to capture the perfect angle. Not exactly pregnancy-friendly.

"So we're down a photographer," Nut continued. "And I thought of you."

My heart rate picked up. This was exactly what I'd been hoping for—literally minutes ago, I'd been sitting here wishing for different opportunities, and now one was dropping into my lap.

"What's the project?" I asked, trying to keep my voice professional despite the excitement building in my chest.

"I can send more information by email," Nut said. "You don't need to answer now. Take some time to think about it. Look at the details. Make sure it works with your schedule and your... everything."

He was being careful. I appreciated that.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Is this something you'd be interested in?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes," I said. "Absolutely yes."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to—"

"I'm sure." My voice was firmer now, more confident. "This is exactly the kind of

work I've been wanting to do. Send me the details."

I could almost hear Nut's smile through the phone. "Okay, I'll get the email out to you right now. Review everything, let me know if you have questions, and we'll go from there."

"Thank you, Nut. Really."

"Don't thank me yet. Thank me when the shoot's over and you haven't killed anyone." He laughed. "Talk soon!"

The line went dead.

I stared at my phone for a moment, processing what had just happened.

An opportunity. A real one. Not a safety net or a distraction, but a genuine step toward the career I wanted. Maybe things are starting to turn around, I thought cautiously. Maybe this is what happens when you stop chasing what hurts you and start moving toward what helps you.

I set the phone down and waited.

The email arrived with a cheerful chime from my laptop. I opened it immediately, my eyes scanning the contents with growing excitement.

Subject: Makeup Campaign - Photographer Assignment

The message was detailed, thorough. Exactly what I'd expect from Nut's organized chaos.

The client was a major makeup brand—one I recognized, one whose products I'd seen in advertisements and on the faces of influencers across the country. They were launching a new line specifically designed for Songkran, the Thai New Year festival. Waterproof formulas. Bright colors. Products that promised to last through the sweat and chaos of the water festival celebrations.

The campaign concept was youthful and upbeat, designed to grab attention in the crowded pre-Songkran market. They wanted images that felt alive—full of movement and energy and joy. Not the sterile, posed shots that made people scroll past without stopping, but something dynamic. Something that made you want to be part of the celebration.

The shoot schedule was ambitious. Multiple days in the studio, with additional location work planned for outdoor scenes. Models of various ages and backgrounds. Different setups for different products. It would be one of the longest projects I'd worked on with this company—ignoring, of course, the canceled sessions with William. The irony wasn't lost on me. One opportunity destroyed by personal disaster; another rising from the ashes to take its place.

The pay was good. More than good, actually. Enough to rebuild my depleted savings, to give me some breathing room, to let me focus on quality rather than quantity for a while.

But it wasn't the money that made my heart race.

It was the work.

I really wanted to get back to more professional projects.

The restaurant shoots had served their purpose. They'd kept me employed, kept money coming in, kept my portfolio growing even during the lean times. But they'd also become... routine. Predictable. The same setups, the same angles, the same challenges over and over again.

This was different.

A proper studio. Proper lighting. Proper equipment. The kind of environment where creativity could flourish, where every shot was intentional, where the final product would be something people actually saw and remembered.

I loved working in studios.

It was one of my earliest memories of falling in love with photography—visiting a professional set as a teenager, watching the photographers work, seeing how they shaped light like it was clay. How they created entire worlds within the confines of four walls and some carefully positioned equipment.

The lighting especially. Natural light was beautiful, unpredictable, a gift when it cooperated. But studio lighting was control. It was knowing exactly what you wanted and having the tools to achieve it. It was painting with photons, building images from the ground up.

And the space. Oh, the space.

Restaurant shoots meant cramped kitchens and crowded dining rooms, working around tables and chairs and staff members trying to do their jobs. It meant improvising constantly, adapting to environments that were never designed for photography. But a studio? A studio was designed for exactly this. Every inch planned with intention. Room to move, to experiment, to find the perfect angle without bumping into a busboy.

I missed it. I missed creating something different, something more than just a white background and a product shot. I missed collaborating with art directors and stylists and other professionals who understood the vision and worked together to achieve it.

This project promised all of that.

I read the email again, slower this time, absorbing the details.

The creative brief was attached—pages of mood boards and reference images and notes about the brand's identity. They wanted freshness. Authenticity. Moments that felt candid even when they were carefully constructed.

They wanted color—lots of it. Bright splashes against water droplets, makeup that stood out against wet skin, the particular vibrancy of Songkran celebrations captured in every frame. They wanted diversity. Models of different backgrounds, different styles, different relationships with beauty. Not the cookie-cutter perfection of traditional campaigns, but something that reflected the real range of people who would actually use these products. I could do this. More than that—I wanted to do this.

The enthusiasm surprised me. For weeks, work had felt like a chore—a necessary distraction, something I did to avoid thinking about what was really wrong. But this? This felt different. This felt like excitement. This felt like possibility.

I composed a reply.

To: Nut

Subject: RE: Makeup Campaign - Photographer Assignment

Nut,

I've reviewed the materials and I'm absolutely in. This is exactly the kind of project I've been hoping for, Thank you for thinking of me. I won't let you down.

Looking forward to the details on scheduling and logistics.

Est.

I hit send before I could second-guess myself.

Then I leaned back in my chair and let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

The apartment was quiet around me. Clean. Organized. Full of afternoon light and fresh air and the promise of something new.

I thought about where I'd been a day ago—drunk at William's door, leaving desperate voicemails, vomiting on expensive carpets. I thought about the breakdown. The shame. The rock-bottom moment of realizing that I'd completely lost control.

And now this.

A clean apartment. A therapy appointment pending. A new project that actually excited me.



It wasn't a complete transformation. The hurt was still there, tucked away but not forgotten. The tendency toward self-destruction was still part of me, waiting for the next moment of weakness.

But I was trying.

I was actively, deliberately trying to be better. And maybe that was all anyone could do. Take the small steps. Make the hard choices. Show up for yourself even when it felt impossible.

One dish at a time, I thought again. One surface at a time. One email at a time.

I closed my laptop and stood up.

The evening was approaching. The light had gone golden, painting the city outside my window in warm colors. Somewhere out there, life was happening—people living, loving, making their own mistakes and finding their own paths. I was one of them now.

Not fixed. Not healed. But moving. And movement, I was learning, was its own kind of hope.

Monday morning arrived with purpose.

I woke up early—not from anxiety or insomnia, but from genuine anticipation. The apartment was still clean from yesterday's purge, the morning light filtering through curtains I'd actually bothered to open. Everything felt different. Organized. Intentional.

I showered quickly, dressed in something professional but comfortable—black slacks, a button-down shirt that didn't wrinkle easily, shoes I could walk in without wanting to die. The kind of outfit that said I take this seriously without screaming I'm trying too hard.

The bus ride to the office building was familiar now. I'd made this trip dozens of times for various assignments, but today felt different. Today wasn't about picking up equipment or dropping off files. Today was about being shown around like I actually belonged there.

The lobby was sleek and modern, all glass and chrome and the particular hum of professional ambition. I checked in at the front desk and waited for Nut to come down.

He arrived within minutes, bouncing out of the elevator with his characteristic energy.

"Est! Perfect timing. Ready for the grand tour?"

I hadn't realized how big the company actually was.

"We own five floors of this building," Nut explained as we stepped into the elevator. "Well, technically the parent company owns them, but we operate out of all five. Different departments on different levels—photography, video production, post-processing, client relations, and the executive offices up top."

The doors opened onto a floor that buzzed with activity. People moved between desks with purpose, screens glowed with editing software, phones rang and were answered with practiced efficiency.

"Main workspace," Nut said, gesturing broadly. "This is where most of the magic happens. Or at least, where most of the emails get answered and the deadlines get stressed about."

He led me through the open-plan office, pointing out different areas as we passed. The photography department. The retouching station. The corner where the video team huddled over monitors, reviewing footage.

"Restrooms are down that hall," he continued, barely breaking stride. "Men's on the left, women's on the right, accessible at the end. Cleaning staff comes through three times a day, so they're usually pretty decent."

We moved to the next floor.

"Break room," Nut announced, pushing open a door to reveal a space that was actually pleasant. Comfortable chairs. A coffee machine that looked like it cost more than my camera. Vending machines, a refrigerator, a microwave.

"You can eat in here, obviously. There's also a dining area on the fourth floor if you want something more substantial. We have a caterer who comes in for lunch on weekdays—subsidized by the company, so it's cheap but actually edible."

I nodded, taking it all in. The scale of the operation was impressive. I'd worked with this company before, but always in a freelance capacity—showing up for specific shoots, delivering specific files, never really seeing behind the curtain. This was different. This was being invited inside.

"And this," Nut said, his voice taking on a note of pride, "is Studio 3."

We'd arrived at a floor that felt different from the offices above. The ceiling was higher here, the space more open. The walls were painted a neutral grey, and I could see the bones of a professional photography studio—lighting rigs mounted on tracks, backdrops stored in the corner, equipment cases lined up along the wall.

"This is where we'll be doing the makeup campaign," Nut continued. "Plenty of

space to work with. Good ceiling height for the lighting setups we'll need. Connected to the waiting area for the models, so there's easy access without them having to walk through the whole building." The studio was being cleaned when we passed through.

We moved on, Nut pointing out the adjacent waiting area—comfortable chairs, good lighting, a small station for makeup touch-ups and last-minute adjustments.

"The models we've chosen are all confirmed," Nut said as we walked. "Most of the creative decisions have already been made—color palettes, shot concepts, the general vibe we're going for. But that doesn't mean I don't want your input."

I looked at him, surprised. "Really?"

"Really." He stopped walking, turning to face me directly. "You're not just here to point a camera and press a button, Est. You're here because you have a good eye. You see things other people miss. So if you have ideas—concepts, images, different approaches—I want to hear them."

"I... thank you. That means a lot."

"Don't thank me. Just deliver." He grinned, the moment of seriousness passing as quickly as it had arrived. "Now, let me walk you back down. I've got a meeting in ten minutes and my assistant will murder me if I'm late again."

The elevator ride down was quiet but comfortable.

I was still processing everything I'd seen. The scale of the operation. The professionalism. The resources that would be available for this project—proper equipment, proper space, proper support. This was what I'd been missing. This was the level I wanted to work at. Nut accompanied me all the way to the lobby, which felt unnecessary but also kind. Like he wanted to make sure I felt welcome, that this wasn't just a transaction but the beginning of something more.

"Your ID badge will be ready by tomorrow," he said as we reached the front doors. "I'll have someone email you the details. Once you have it, you can move around freely—within reason, obviously. Don't go poking around in the executive offices unless you want to explain yourself to security."

"Noted."

"And Est?" He paused, his expression softening slightly. "That email you sent about the therapist. Good for you. Really. It takes guts to ask for help."

I felt my cheeks warm. "Thanks. I'm... trying."

"That's all any of us can do." He clapped me on the shoulder. "Talk soon. And start thinking about those ideas—I meant what I said. Fresh perspectives are always

welcome." I watched him disappear back into the elevator, his energy carrying him away as quickly as it had arrived.

Then I stepped out into the morning sun and headed home.

Around noon, I changed into professional but comfortable clothes.

The morning at the office had been encouraging, energizing even. But I still had regular work to do—the kind of work that paid the bills while I waited for the bigger opportunities to materialize. Today's assignment was a restaurant shoot. Not the most exciting project in the world, but honest work. Necessary work.

I grabbed my camera and headed out.

The restaurant was even better than it had looked in the reference photos. It was one of those places that had clearly invested in its aesthetic—exposed brick walls, industrial lighting, plants cascading from every possible surface. The kind of establishment that attracted influencers and couples on anniversary dates, that photographed well because it was designed to photograph well.

The manager met me at the door, all smiles and nervous energy.

"Thank you so much for coming! We're so excited about the website redesign. The current photos are from when we first opened, and they just don't capture what we've become, you know?" I knew. I'd heard variations of this speech a hundred times before.

"Let me show you around. We've set aside the afternoon for this—no reservations until dinner service, so you'll have the space to yourself." I followed him through the restaurant, already framing shots in my mind. The light from the windows. The way the plants softened the industrial edges. The arrangement of tables that created natural leading lines toward the bar.

The work was familiar. Comfortable. The same questions I'd answered a thousand times before.

"Can you make the food look more... appetizing?"

That's literally what I'm here for.

"Should we put more garnish on the plates?"

Only if you want them to look like a garden exploded.

"How long until we can see the finished photos?"

About as long as it takes me to edit them, which depends on how many we're

taking.

I smiled through all of it, the professional mask firmly in place. Not because I was pretending, exactly—the work was genuinely enjoyable, the food genuinely delicious—but because this was the job. This was what I did. Answer questions, manage expectations, capture images that made ordinary things look extraordinary.

The food, when it finally came out, was as beautiful as I'd hoped. Careful plating. Rich colors. The kind of dishes that photographed well because someone in the kitchen actually cared about presentation. I worked, moving through the menu systematically. Appetizers. Mains. Desserts. Drinks. Each dish arranged just so, each angle considered, each shot evaluated before moving on. By the time I finished, I had several hundred images to sort through later—more than I needed, but that was always better than the alternative.

"These are going to be amazing," the manager said, hovering as I packed up my equipment. "I can already tell. Thank you so much."

"Happy to help." I paused, remembering the food I'd been smelling all afternoon. "Actually—would it be possible to get some of the menu items to go? I'd like to bring something to a friend."

The food was boxed up carefully, arranged in bags that wouldn't spill on the bus. I'd ordered generously—enough for three people, in case Hong was around. Tui had been feeding me for days; the least I could do was return the favor.

The bus ride to Ink & Ashes was familiar now, the route as comfortable as the one to my own apartment. I watched the city scroll past the window, thinking about the day. The office tour. The restaurant shoot. The way both experiences had felt different from what had come before.

I'm building something, I realized. Not just surviving. Actually building.

The thought was new. Strange. But not unwelcome.

When I arrived at the studio, only a couple of girls with bags were leaving. They looked like university students—young, fashionable, probably here for piercings or small tattoos. They didn't pay me any attention as they passed, absorbed in their own conversation about something I couldn't quite catch.

The studio looked quiet otherwise. The neon sign glowed its familiar purple, but through the window I could see that the chairs were empty, the equipment dark. Before going in, I heard footsteps jogging behind me.

I turned.

Hong was there, slightly out of breath, his silver hair catching the afternoon light. He must have been running—not full sprinting, but that quick jog of someone who's

almost late and knows it.

"Hey," I said, holding the door open for him. "Cutting it close?"

"Lost track of time." He slipped past me into the studio, his shoulder brushing mine in the narrow doorway. I followed him inside, taking in his outfit as he moved ahead of me. A gray t-shirt—way too big for him, hanging off his frame in that deliberately oversized way that was fashionable now—with one of his own illustrations on the front.—a stylized skull with flowers blooming from the eye sockets, the design I'd seen in the merchandise display. Gray jeans, comfortable shoes.

The uniform of someone who wasn't trying to impress anyone but looked good anyway.

Once inside, Tui was alone in the reception area. He was standing behind the counter, looking at his phone with that particular focus that meant he was either texting someone important or scrolling through something mindless to avoid thinking. Hard to tell which. He was wearing a black tank top and black pants—simple, practical, the kind of outfit that worked for both creative work and the physical demands of tattooing. His arms were on display, the tattoos I'd seen a hundred times still catching my attention with their intricate detail.

"Hi," he greeted us, looking up from his phone. His eyes moved from me to Hong, lingering for just a moment before something in his expression shifted. "I was going to call you."

"Too slow," Hong said, dropping his backpack on the sofa with the carelessness of someone who felt completely at home here. "What did you need?"

"Nothing urgent. Just wanted to check in about the schedule for this week."

I stepped forward, holding up the bags of food. The restaurant's logo was printed on the side—elegant, understated, probably designed by someone who charged too much.

"I brought food," I announced.

They both turned to look at me.

Their expressions were almost identical—surprise morphing into interest morphing into something that looked a lot like hunger. I realized, suddenly, that it was well past lunch and neither of them had eaten.

"You're my savior." Hong said dramatically, pressing his hand to his heart like he was in a melodrama. "An angel descended from heaven with sustenance for the starving."

"Don't be so dramatic."

"I'm not being dramatic. I'm being accurate." He crossed the room toward me, eyes fixed on the bags. "What did you bring? Please tell me there's something with protein. I've been living on coffee and hope for the past six hours."

Tui's reaction was quieter but no less genuine. He set his phone down and came around the counter, a smile spreading across his face—the real kind, the one that reached his eyes. "Thank you," he said simply. "You didn't have to do this."

"I know." I shrugged, trying to play it casual despite the warmth blooming in my chest. "But you've been feeding me for days. It was time to return the favor."

"It wasn't about keeping score."

"I know that too." I met his eyes. "But I wanted to. So let me."

We moved to the small table in the corner—the one usually reserved for consultations, now cleared of design books and reference photos to make room for the feast I'd brought. Hong was already opening containers before we'd even fully sat down, his hunger apparently overriding any sense of decorum.

"Oh, this looks good," he murmured, inhaling deeply over a dish of stir-fried noodles. "Where did you get this?"

"A restaurant I was shooting today. New place, trying to refresh their brand. The food is actually as good as it looks."

"High praise from a food photographer."

"I prefer to think of myself as a general photographer who sometimes points his camera at food."

"Same difference."

Tui was more measured in his approach, serving himself modest portions and waiting until everyone had food before starting to eat. Even in this small thing, his consideration for others was evident. "How did the shoot go?" he asked between bites.

"Fine. Good, actually." I paused, considering how to explain. "It's strange. I used to hate restaurant work—the repetitiveness, the predictability. But today it felt... peaceful. Just doing the job, capturing the images, not thinking about anything else."

"Sometimes simple is good."

"Yeah." I thought about the morning at the office, about the studio I'd seen, about the opportunities waiting. "And speaking of not simple—I got a new project. A big one."

Hong looked up from his noodles, interested. "The makeup thing Tui mentioned?"

"You told him?"

Tui shrugged. "It came up."

"It's a full campaign," I explained, feeling the excitement build as I talked about it.

"Major brand. Proper studio work. Multiple shooting days. The kind of thing I've been wanting to do for years."

"That's amazing." Hong's voice was genuine, no trace of his usual sarcasm.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. It feels like... I don't know. A step forward. After everything that happened."

"It is a step forward," Tui said firmly. "You're moving on. Building something new. That matters." I nodded, focusing on my food to hide the emotion that threatened to surface.

Moving on, I thought. Building something new.

It still felt fragile. Still felt like something that could collapse at any moment. But sitting here, sharing a meal with people who cared about me, talking about work that excited me—it felt possible like something that might actually last.

We ate together, the three of us falling into an easy rhythm of conversation. The food from the restaurant was—rich flavors, careful preparation, the kind of quality that came from a kitchen that actually cared. We passed containers between us, sampling everything, occasionally fighting over the last piece of something particularly good.

The conversation flowed naturally, jumping from topic to topic with the comfortable chaos of people who knew each other well enough to follow tangents. We talked about the restaurant shoot—the exposed brick, the plants, the manager who'd hovered nervously the entire time. Hong wanted to know if the food was as photogenic as it looked in my preview shots, and I assured him it was even better.

We talked about Hong's designs—the new collection he was working on, the pieces that were selling well online, the challenge of balancing artistic vision with commercial viability. He'd been experimenting with more abstract patterns lately, moving away from the literal illustrations toward something more conceptual.

"It's a risk," he admitted, picking at a piece of chicken with his chopsticks. "People like the obvious stuff. The snakes, the skulls, the things they can immediately understand. But I want to push myself."

"Risk is how you grow," Tui said. "If you only ever do what's safe, you stagnate."



"Says the man who's been doing the same tattoo style for three years."

"I'm refining a style. There's a difference."

"Sure there is."

They bickered with the easy familiarity of siblings, and I found myself smiling without realizing it.

We talked about the upcoming guest artist schedule—who was coming after Yuki left, what styles they'd be bringing, how the studio was building its reputation as a destination for international talent. Tui had been in correspondence with an artist from Brazil who specialized in watercolor-style tattoos.

We didn't talk about William.

We didn't talk about heartbreak.

We didn't talk about the week I'd spent falling apart, or the voicemails I'd left, or the vomiting on expensive carpets. Those subjects sat in the corner of the room like uninvited guests, present but politely ignored.

I was grateful for that.

Hong set down his chopsticks and leaned back in his chair, his expression shifting to something more serious. "So," he began, and there was a quality to his voice that made both Tui and me pay attention. "I have something to tell you."

"Should we be worried?" Tui asked.

"No. The opposite, actually." Hong paused, seeming to gather his thoughts. "My university has an exhibition coming up."

"An art exhibition?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's an annual thing, but this year they're doing something different. More open. More community-focused." He pulled out his phone and scrolled through something, though I couldn't see what. "The university is opening its doors to the public—gallery owners, art enthusiasts, local authorities, basically anyone who wants to come. They're showcasing work from students across all disciplines."

"That sounds huge." I said.

"It is." Hong nodded, still scrolling. "Painting, sculpture, performance, sound art, digital installation—everything. Three days of exhibitions and events. They're really pushing to connect with the broader art community."

Tui was watching him with an expression I couldn't quite read. "And you're participating?"

"I..." Hong hesitated, something vulnerable flickering across his usually composed features. "In previous years, I haven't. I never felt ready. My work was too personal, or too rough, or too... I don't know. Not good enough."

"Your work is incredible," I said, surprised by the vehemence in my own voice. "The designs you do for the studio alone are—"

"Thank you." Hong cut me off gently. "But this is different. This isn't commercial work. This isn't designs for t-shirts or concepts for tattoos. This is... art. The kind of thing that stands alone and asks to be judged on its own merits."

"That sounds terrifying," Tui said.

"It is." Hong finally set his phone down and looked at us directly. "But this year, the theme is more open. Less restrictive. And I've been working on something that... I think it's ready. I think I'm ready."

The admission seemed to cost him something. Hong wasn't the type to share vulnerabilities easily—he usually hid behind dry observations and careful detachment. This was different. This was real.

"I'm proud of you," Tui said quietly. "That takes courage."

"Don't get sentimental on me."

"Too late. I'm already composing a congratulatory speech in my head."

"Please don't."

Hong reached into his backpack, which he'd dropped on the sofa earlier, and pulled out his wallet.

"Obviously, my sister and nephew will be there," he said, his tone shifting back to something more casual. "Kavin's already practicing his 'impressed face' for when he sees my work. It mostly just looks like he needs to sneeze, but the effort is appreciated."

We laughed at that, the image of a four-year-old trying to look artistically contemplative too perfect not to enjoy.

"My parents are in China right now," Hong continued. "Visiting my grandparents. They're planning to stay for a few months, and it would be a bit absurd for them to fly back for only three days."

There was something in his voice when he said that—not resentment, exactly, but a quiet acceptance of distance that I recognized. The particular loneliness of having family who loved you but weren't present.

"So..." Hong pulled two objects from his wallet and set them on the table between

us. "I brought tickets for my favorite siblings."

They were double tickets. Small, elegant, printed on heavy cardstock with the university's logo and the exhibition dates in raised lettering. Clearly professional, clearly special—not the kind of thing you printed off at home and handed out casually.

I stared at them, something catching in my throat.

"Favorite siblings?" Tui repeated, one eyebrow raised.

"Don't let it go to your head." Hong pushed one ticket toward each of us. "It's in a month. I hope you guys can go."

"Hong..." I started, then stopped, unsure how to express what I was feeling.

The gesture was so simple, but it meant so much more than a piece of cardstock. It meant Hong considered us family. It meant he wanted us there for something important to him. It meant we'd moved beyond colleagues, beyond casual friends, into something deeper.

"I'm surprised," I admitted finally. "I mean—I'm honored. But surprised."

"Why?" Hong's expression was carefully neutral, but I could see the uncertainty underneath.

"I don't know. We've known each other for a while, but..." I struggled to articulate it. "I feel like I've only really gotten to know you these past few months. Before that, you were always so quiet. I couldn't tell if you actually liked me or just tolerated my presence."

Hong considered this. "I'm not good at... opening up. With most people. It takes me a while to trust."

"And now?"

"Now you've earned it." He shrugged, as if this admission was nothing significant. "You've been around. You've been real. You haven't tried to be something you're not or expected me to be something I'm not. That matters." The words landed somewhere deep in my chest, right next to the ache that was slowly healing.

You've earned it.

From someone like Hong—reserved, careful, deliberate in all his connections—that meant something.

Tui picked up his ticket and examined it, running his thumb over the raised lettering. "I'm happy you're participating, Hong," he said, and his voice was warm in a way I rarely heard from him. "This is a big deal."

"It's just a student exhibition—"

"It's not 'just' anything." Tui cut him off firmly. "You're putting your work out there. Your real work, not the commercial stuff. That takes guts."

"You already said that."

"Because it's worth repeating."

Hong ducked his head slightly, clearly uncomfortable with the praise. His silver hair fell forward, hiding his expression.

Tui grinned, sensing an opportunity.

"I was starting to think you were the antisocial one in your class," he said, his tone teasing. "The mysterious artist who never shows his work, never talks to anyone, just lurks in the corner judging everyone's technique."

"I don't lurk—"

"You definitely lurk. I've seen you at gallery openings. You stand in corners and analyze brushstrokes while everyone else is drinking free wine."

"That's not lurking, that's appreciating the art."

"It's lurking."

"P'TUI!" Hong shouted, grabbing a napkin and launching it at Tui's face.

The napkin hit its target with surprising accuracy, fluttering against Tui's nose before falling into his lap. He caught it, laughing, while Hong sputtered with indignation.

"I do NOT lurk!"

"You absolutely lurk. You're the king of lurking. They should give you a medal for lurking."

"I hate you."

"No you don't."

"I'm taking back your ticket."

"You wouldn't dare."

I watched them, warmth spreading through my chest despite everything. This was what I'd been missing. Not just during my breakdown, but for longer than I wanted to admit. This sense of belonging. This easy affection. This feeling of being part of something larger than myself.

Favorite siblings, Hong had said.

Maybe he was right. Maybe that's what we were becoming.

The napkin war escalated briefly—Tui retaliating with a crumpled receipt, Hong defending himself with a plastic container lid—before I intervened by threatening to take back the leftover food.

"Truce!" Hong declared immediately, setting down his improvised weapon. "The food is sacred."

"Finally, someone with priorities," I said.

We settled back into our chairs, the playful energy slowly fading into something quieter. The afternoon light had shifted, casting long shadows across the studio floor. Through the window, I could see people passing by on the street—ordinary life continuing, indifferent to our small moment of connection.

"So you'll come?" Hong asked, and there was something vulnerable in the question despite his casual tone. "To the exhibition?"

I looked at the ticket in my hand. At the dates, the carefully designed typography.

"Wouldn't miss it." I said.

"Me neither." Tui added.

Hong nodded, something easing in his posture. "Good. That's... good."

We sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the weight of the invitation settling between us. Then Hong's phone buzzed, breaking the spell. Hong gathered his things, stuffing his phone into his pocket and slinging his backpack over one shoulder. The tickets had been collected, tucked safely away—one in my wallet, one presumably in Tui's pocket.

Tui and I sat in the aftermath of the meal, empty containers scattered across the table, the warm feeling of the afternoon still lingering.

"That was unexpected." I said finally.

"Hong inviting us?"

"Hong opening up." I shook my head slowly. "I've known him for a year, and I feel like I've learned more about him in the last month than all that time combined."

"He's like that." Tui started gathering the empty containers, stacking them for disposal. "He keeps things close until he's sure. And then once he's sure, it's like a dam breaking."

"How long did it take him to open up to you?"

"About six months." Tui smiled at the memory. "He barely spoke to me for the first three. I thought he hated me. Turned out he was just... observing. Figuring out if I was worth trusting."

"And you passed the test?"

"Apparently." He shrugged. "I never found out what the criteria were. But one day he just started talking, and he hasn't stopped since."

I thought about that. About the careful way Hong watched people, the deliberate way he chose his connections. It made sense, in a way. Someone with that much sensitivity, that much insight—they'd need to protect themselves. They'd need to be sure before they let anyone in.

Kind of like William, a traitorous part of my brain whispered.

I pushed the thought away.

"The exhibition's going to be amazing," I said instead. "I can't wait to see what he's been working on."

"Me neither." Tui stood, carrying the trash toward the bin. "It's about time the world saw what he can do." I nodded, but I wasn't really thinking about Hong's art anymore.

I was thinking about tickets. About invitations. About the way people let you into their lives, slowly and carefully, piece by piece.

And I was thinking about how lucky I was to have people who wanted me there.

We cleaned up together, moving around each other with the easy coordination of people who'd done this before. Trash disposed of, table wiped down, chairs pushed back into place. When we finished, Tui looked at me with an assessing gaze.

"How are you doing?" he asked. "Really?"

"Better." I considered the question carefully. "Not fixed. Not healed. But... better. The thing at the office today, the studio tour—it helped. Seeing where the project will happen, feeling like part of something larger."

"And the therapy thing?"

"Sent the email yesterday. Waiting to hear back about scheduling."

Tui nodded, something like pride crossing his features. "Good. That's really good, Est."

"It's a start."

"It's more than a start." He reached out and squeezed my shoulder briefly. "It's proof that you're taking care of yourself. That matters."

I felt my throat tighten unexpectedly. "Thanks. For everything. Not just the past week, but... all of it. Being there. Not giving up on me."

"Never going to happen." His smile was warm, genuine. "That's what family does."

Family.

The word hit differently now, after Hong's tickets, after everything, that's what I'd been building all along. Not just a career, not just a life—but a family. A real one, chosen rather than assigned, held together by loyalty and love rather than blood. It was fragile. It was new. It was nowhere near as stable as I wanted it to be. But it was mine.